

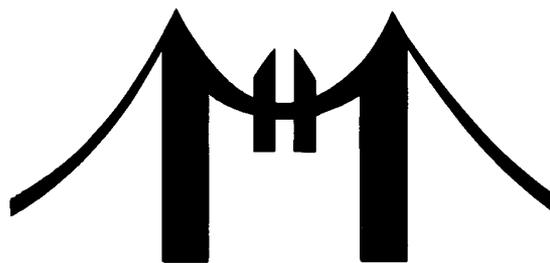
matrix house

Its first year at Lexington, Ky.

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Matrix House is a self-help, therapeutic community which was formed in January 1970 by a group of highly motivated former narcotic addicts. Matrix began in a room at the Clinical Research Center of the National Institute of Mental Health at Lexington, Ky. It now occupies a separate building on the grounds of the Center, and it is the first unit of the Center to be completely operated and administered by ex-addicts. Matrix is an official aftercare agency, under the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Act (NARA) of 1966. Members who have been committed under the act have the opportunity to continue their involvement with Matrix beyond their "inpatient phase" at the Clinical Research Center.



matrix

Matrix members chose this symbol because it represents "the bridge to freedom" from drugs



Matrix members occupy a 100-bed unit on the grounds of the Clinical Research Center of the National Institute of Mental Health at Lexington, Ky.

The information in this paper was obtained partly from my 8-day stay in Matrix House during the early part of November 1970, partly from subsequent participation in Matrix House activities, and partly from data collected by the Social Science Section of the Clinical Research Center (CRC). This discussion is intended to be only an impressionistic description, since my approach to studying Matrix was not theoretical. However, since a former CRC staff member, Michael Agar, wrote a paper after spending some time on a ward in the Center, I shall make some comparisons between my observations and his. Agar's paper, "Participant Observation on a Male NARA Unit," distributed in-house at the Center, was dated April 22, 1969. His observations were somewhat subjective, as were mine.

Background of Matrix

In November 1969 a group of CRC residents formed their own therapy group, which they called the Lighthouse. The group was under the direction of a member of the treatment staff. With permission, they cleaned and painted the solarium directly above the floor on which the Social Science Section was located. Because of this location of their "meditation chamber," and because I knew several of the members, I formed a casual relationship with the group. My interest was aroused by them, and I decided to chronicle their development. At the time, my interest was only in describing a new treatment philosophy at Lexington and perhaps recording its progress.

The group used the solarium for confrontation therapy, for reading, and for social activities. After a short time, however, some members decided that they had to take a drug-free pledge. They felt that they were being hypocritical in their therapy sessions since they had no real commitment against drug use. They also were dissatisfied with the lack of seriousness in the sessions. But when this faction suggested to the other members that they take the pledge too, they were met with hostility and ridicule.

At this time, the pledge faction decided to break from the Lighthouse group and form its own therapy group. The members met in a ward room and started to play the "game." The game was patterned after the Synanon model (1), because two of the leaders had been in Synanon. The group met secretly for about 6 weeks to avoid Lighthouse members, and then formed a new group to supplant the Lighthouse. Their therapist recognized the sincerity of their request and helped them to obtain formal permission from the CRC administrators to meet as a therapy group.

On January 16, 1970, the group named itself Matrix, taken from Webster's Dictionary as "something within which something else originates or takes form or develops." With a new name and formal recognition, the Matrix group was able to operate openly and free of worry about harassment from the Lighthouse group.

Matrix grew quickly from four to about 20 members, and they were granted a ward of their



Participation in lively group discussions is one of the many activities that keeps Matrix members busy throughout the day

own. By this time the members had consolidated the underlying philosophy of their new treatment modality, which embodied two principal rules—no drugs and no violence—the basic rules of any Synanon-type group. They also embraced the philosophy that only trust in and concern for others would help them to break away completely from their former destructive “dope fiend” behavior.

Some important events occurred during the first year of Matrix. The first and most significant event was in April when it was given a 100-bed unit. The members immediately refurbished the building, moved in, and called it Matrix House. Another event was CRC’s hiring of four ex-addicts to be directors of Matrix; they were the first ex-addicts to be employed by the Federal Government.

The Game and Other Activities

Matrix House became fully autonomous with regard to the therapeutic methods it used. The main tool was, and still is, the game, which is played three evenings a week. The game is a form of confrontation therapy, which is essentially leaderless. About 12 people sit in a circle and discuss a member’s recent behavior. This discussion may become extremely animated, to the point of shouting, or it may be very hilarious—especially when the person on the hot seat tries to defend what the rest of the group perceives as bad behavior. At no time is violence or threat of violence allowed. If someone’s criticism becomes too destructive, the game may be shifted to that person.

The “indicted” person in the hot seat is asked to change his behavior, even if he cannot understand why. Experience has taught that insights come later from this change. Then too, the fact that Matrix members are together night and day has its own positive reinforcement features. If the indicted person has not modified his behavior since the last game, he is reindicted in the next game. Through meaningful concern and affection, everyone comes to trust the intent of every other person in the house, and all can see the efficacy of such beliefs.

The underlying philosophy of Matrix House is maintained constantly by group readings and discussions of various philosophers and authors. These discussions are held regularly for 1 hour after lunch. In the evenings, the members use their free time to read or discuss Matrix concepts, which are printed or tape recorded for their archives. They also may discuss literature or participate in sensitivity training sessions modeled after the Esalen Institute (2).

The Matrix lifestyle is designed to overcome “the negative behavior” of the addict’s street code. In reality, it is a complete reversal of what the members consider a degraded and dehumanized existence. And, in fact, it is a far more rigorous way of life than one might expect. This lifestyle is designed to specifically correct the “dope fiend” ideal; thus it must be very rigid, because Matrix members know too well how easily an addict can manipulate and “con” people.



Planting is a new experience for many members

If a member cannot change his behavior and conform to the standards set by the group, he is dealt with by a number of devices, such as a verbal reprimand, a loss of speaking privileges, or a change of job. The most severe penalty may be that the person is asked to leave. In fact, the first director of Matrix was not willing to uphold the standards of the house, and he was replaced. Shortly after the group moved into its house, he left Lexington. These two events were important watersheds in helping the group to consolidate its identity and strengthen its philosophy.

The Matrix Program

The program is divided roughly into two phases—relearning and reintegration. In the first phase, the addict relearns responsibility and how to relate to people. Responsibility may be learned in performing the work tasks assigned in the house. There are a series of jobs in the house which are ranked according to difficulty. A new member may start on the service crew, cleaning floors or washing dishes. As he demonstrates his ability at each level, he may work his way up the graduated series of positions in the house. At each level, he may earn more privileges and assume more supervision of other members in running the house.

The relearning phase is also characterized by other activities which help the addict change his image of himself. He is encouraged to attend daily seminars to discuss topical issues and to participate in other discussions. Since the Matrix member seems to be a very encapsulated person, the seminars help him to gain confidence, especially if he is asked to give an extemporaneous speech.

After the workday, which is often longer than 8 hours, the members are encouraged to meet and

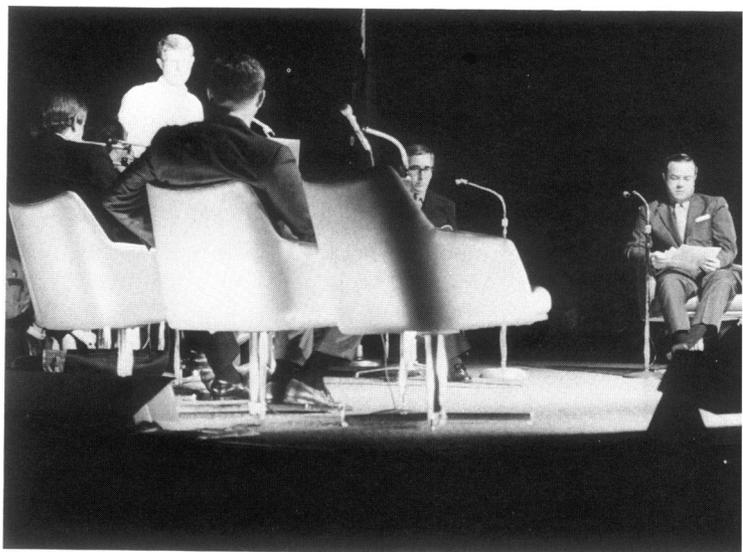


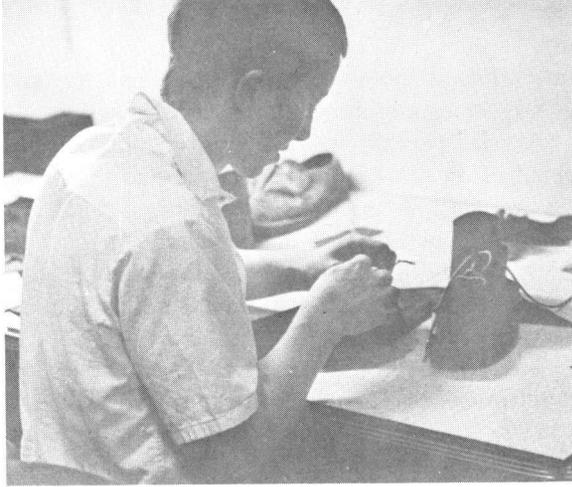
Educational discussions take place in a classroom setting

talk. They may listen to tape recordings or read books together and then discuss them. All these activities are designed to help them learn more about people and to interact socially.

Reintegration is achieved by interaction with the larger community in various ways. Matrix has an open house every Saturday night, and the public is invited to attend. It has a “square” game club in which CRC staff and members of the local community participate. Matrix members also host visitors who wish to see what Matrix is and how it works. Other outside activities include speaking to groups throughout the State on drug abuse and the philosophy of Matrix. The demand for Matrix speakers has risen sharply. At present, the average is about one a day.

Speaking engagements are increasing for Matrix members





Moccasins are among the products sold by Matrix Industries

The members formed Matrix Industries, and they have a small shop in which they make jewelry, clothing, and leather goods for sale to retail stores. Not only does this provide an outlet for the many talented members, but the profits are used to buy personal items for the group.

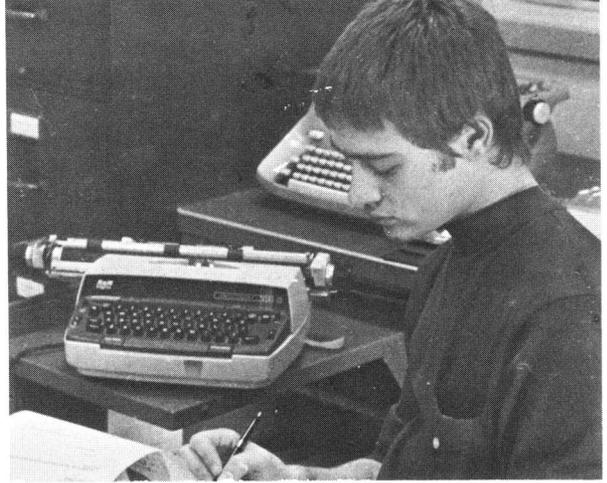
Finally, the members conduct game sessions at correctional institutions in Louisville and Lexington. These institutions include penitentiaries and reformatories for females and juveniles. The games sessions are an effort to demonstrate and teach a positive lifestyle and to illustrate the effectiveness of the game.

Structure of the House

Matrix is a highly structured organization. It has a number of departments, each directed by a department head. Every new member is placed in a department at a low level, and he is expected to show enough initiative to work into different positions in the house. Although it is logically possible for anyone to become a department head, there is a differentiation between older members (in Matrix for about 6 months or longer) and relatively new members to avoid a too-rapid assumption of authority. However, after a person "works his way up through the ranks," he may become a department head. In this position, he is guided by a job description, which may be modified at any time, as well as his abilities and experience in Matrix.

The following list is a rough hierarchical ranking of the various levels of authority as of the end of the first year of Matrix.

Director and deputy director: Responsible for running the house and its functions within the larger Clinical Research Center organization and, in conjunction with the CRC chief, for all policy



A Matrix House department head at work

decisions concerning Matrix. They also work with other government, public, and private agencies on Matrix matters.

Assistant director: Responsible for the daily operation of Matrix. He is essentially a house manager, but he also works with the other directors in making policy decisions.

Director of aftercare and legal affairs: Responsible for directing the aftercare function of Matrix as part of the NARA civil commitment treatment system.

Public relations: Primarily responsible for fulfilling the many requests for Matrix members to speak in drug abuse education programs.

Federation: Responsible for many diverse functions. Essentially it keeps track of each house member's activities, so that any person can be summoned by another if he is needed. The federation also maintains the front desk for greeting visitors and receiving telephone calls. It is the nerve center of Matrix.

Archives: Keeps all the printed and tape-recorded records of the house.

Kitchen and service crews: Prepare excellent food, by imaginative use of the plain institutional supplies, and keep the house "Matrix clean" as opposed to just clean.

Other personnel: Includes secretaries and administrative assistants who support the ongoing functions of the house.

Agar's Observations and Mine

In this comparison, one must keep in mind that Agar's observations were made 2 years before mine. Many changes have taken place in the NARA program since then, not the least of which is the Matrix program. From an historical

perspective, however, Agar's evaluations are interesting. A note of caution here also—the NARA program then or now is not strictly comparable with the Matrix program. From the standpoint of research design, similar variables were not investigated. However, since this discussion is subjective, comparisons can be made from a heuristic viewpoint.

From Agar's observations, the NARA program consisted mainly of job assignment and group therapy. No rehabilitative goal seemed evident for the resident, only a maintenance function. In other words, Lexington was a holding operation until the resident could be sent back to his home community.

From some rough figures, Agar calculated that about 18 percent of the NARA resident's waking hours were spent on his job assignment and about 4 percent in group therapy (this assumed 16 hours per day awake, but Agar mentioned that one way the residents killed time was to nap frequently). Agar's overall conclusion was that the residents' attitudes were poor.

By contrast, from my observations, the Matrix member's attitude is excellent—he is polite, enthusiastic, and quite motivated. Also, the job assignment occupies the greater part of the Matrix member's day, but he considers it necessary to run his home rather than someone else's facility. In Matrix there is definite pride in doing one's work well, and every member is confronted with extremely high expectations for doing so. Everyone in Matrix is expected to pay attention to details and to take the initiative to go beyond the required daily tasks. Even if someone is performing his job well, he may be given another job to prevent him from becoming complacent.

Matrix members work 7 days a week, and at least 60 percent of their waking hours are spent in performing assigned work tasks, according to my observations while living in Matrix House. The great amount of time devoted to work is not designed to keep the members in submission, rather it is to teach them responsibility, which they had never learned before.

The remainder of the Matrix members' time is devoted to group activities and personal tasks. Although they have a television set, it is used primarily for the late movie on Saturday night. By contrast, Agar reported that the NARA residents' television ran constantly from morning to night. Of course, watching television was a "non-program" activity that Agar mentioned, but it was

interesting to note the absence of this and other NARA non-program activities in Matrix.

A great part of the NARA resident's time was spent in recalling activities that he had performed on the street as an addict, according to Agar. The resident slept late and napped much to pass the time. When not otherwise occupied, he engaged in conversations with other residents which centered on drugs or drug use.

The NARA residents regaled each other with descriptions of "hustles," how they had "taken off squares," or their bizarre experiences with the police—either how the police had mistreated them or how they had escaped detection by the police. These conversations were also great learning sessions for new illegal activities, such as hustles and cons, or for perfecting ones they already knew. My own experience with NARA residents has verified this. Several told me of illegal skills they learned in the CRC, referring to it as "Kentucky College."

In Matrix, on the other hand, any such "street talk" is strictly prohibited. Anyone who even mentions some activity related to his life on the streets is reprimanded on the spot. Matrix believes that it cannot promote a set of attitudes which are opposite to the addict's way of life and then have it negated by such destructive talk. While Agar mentioned that one NARA time filler is to attend such organizations as Addicts Anonymous, Matrix seems to live the philosophy full time.

Agar discussed problems of the NARA program which I shall repeat only briefly. This discussion of the Matrix approach to some of these problems is not so much as a solution but as a method of handling them.

The game has been an innovation at Lexington. It eliminates some of the pitfalls observed by Agar of the traditional group therapy used in the CRC. An astute observation of the group process by Agar concerned a well-used device which he called "conning the therapist." Although recent changes in the program were aimed at obviating this practice, it was in full sway in 1969. The "conning" consisted of first a patient's recalcitrant attitude and then an overwhelming flood of insights, which he used to convince the therapist that he was cured. This device was used to obtain an early release date, since the therapist determined when the patient should leave.

In the game, however, there is no formal leader-therapist to con. Since the whole group evaluates a person's behavior, it would be quite difficult



Group support enacted at a sensitivity session

to con all the members. Furthermore, the Matrix members are not preoccupied with obtaining an early release because of the supportive, family-like features of the group. Such features are relatively nonexistent in other parts of the Center.

Another criticism of the group therapy sessions by Agar was that assignments to the group were based on available spaces. Because of this, status positions evolved in the group whereby older or more articulate residents took over; they may even have had dialogs with the therapist which other group members could not understand.

This problem was avoided in the Synanon-like Matrix. Although Matrix does have status positions, they emerge naturally, as in other groups of people, according to abilities. However, there are different levels of games in Matrix, ranging from "floor" games where everyone participates to games in which only leaders participate. By grouping peers together, no one can use his status to force his views on someone else in the group.

Concern for one another is the basis of the "game"



In addition, if it is determined that someone is using unusually large words to obfuscate a point, he is told to use "plain English."

On the whole, Agar felt that the earlier group had very little therapeutic value. If this were so, there could have been no positive reinforcement outside the insights derived within the group. By contrast, Matrix provides positive reinforcement during all the waking hours of its members. If a Matrix member is asked to change his behavior in a suggested way and he does not, he is confronted with this fact until he does.

Social Characteristics of Matrix Members

The Social Science Section routinely interviews all persons admitted to Lexington. The interviews include socioeconomic and demographic information. During calendar year 1970, more than 2,000 persons were interviewed. Since Matrix began in January 1970 it is possible to compare the social characteristics of Matrix members with those of other residents designated as suitable for treatment in 1970. The table only touches on the more important differences between Matrix members

Social differences between NARA residents designated suitable for treatment (ST's) and Matrix members, Lexington, 1970

Variable	ST's	Matrix
Personal:		
Median age at admission	24	22
Average years of narcotic addiction . .	6.3	4.9
Average spent per day for drugs (dollars)	50.62	40.21
Average years of education	10.9	11.2
Marital status (percents):		
Never married	30	42
Married	33	16
Divorced or separated	36	42
Illegal activities:		
Ever arrested (percent)	95	91
Before first narcotic use (percent) . .	63	46
Before addicted to narcotics (percent)	79	58
Average number of arrests	8.0	5.2
Average number months served	24.8	16.7
Family background:		
Head of household of resident at age 14 (percents)—		
Occupation:		
Professional-managerial	19	31
Clerical and sales	12	18
Skilled and semiskilled	36	30
Unskilled	22	16
Never worked	11	4
Education:		
College graduate	10	27
Some college	10	8
High school graduate	18	22
0-12 years	53	33
"Don't know"	8	11
Left program, unauthorized departure from hospital (percent)	25	38

and other residents suitable for treatment (ST's). I offer it only for additional information. The figures are based on questionnaires administered to 567 ST's and 57 Matrix members.

The table reveals some interesting differences between the two groups. Matrix members are younger than the ST group (from which most of the Matrix members came). Matrix members' narcotics habits are of shorter duration and less expensive. Matrix members are better educated and have better socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, Matrix members seem to be less criminally oriented in that they reported fewer arrests and less time served.

At the time of this report, figures were not yet available on relapse rates of residents who left Lexington before completing their treatment. Thus, I compared ST and Matrix rates of unauthorized departure; these were 25 percent for the ST group and 38 percent for Matrix. However, Matrix members stay an average of 5½ months while ST's stay about 4 months. In view of the vigorous Matrix program, 38 percent seems low.

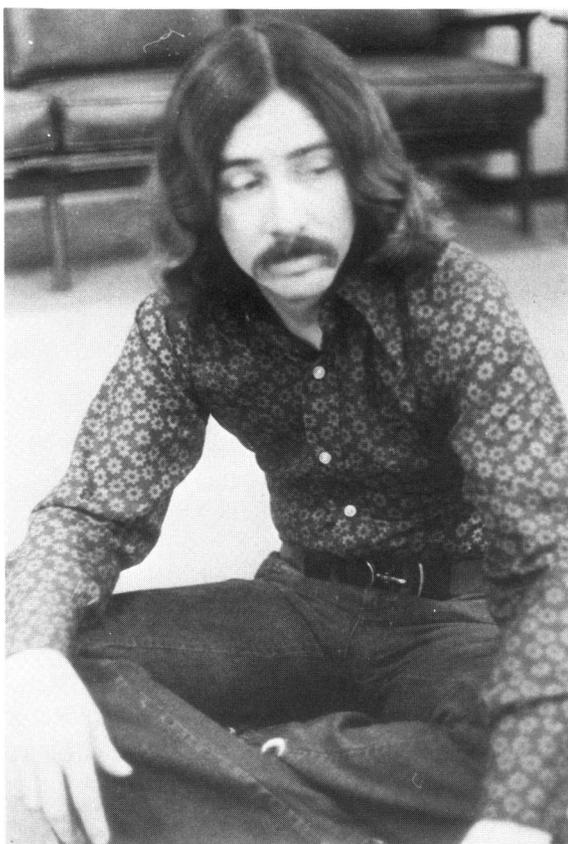
Conclusion

Matrix represents one of the more important innovations at Lexington since its inception in 1935. For the greater part of its existence, Lexington offered a medical-psychiatric model within a penitentiary-like atmosphere. This model provided rather dismal results, as evidenced by the relapse rates (return to drug use) which were reported in the following five followup studies of Lexington patients.

Reference	Sample size	Percent relapse
Pescor, 1943 (3).....	4,766	40
Kuznesof, 1955 (4).....	83	80
Hunt and Odoroff, 1962 (5).....	1,912	93
Duval, et al., 1963 (6).....	453	46
Vaillant, 1966 (7).....	100	90

The point here is not that Matrix represents the answer to Lexington's relapse problem, but it does represent a new direction in the Center's treatment philosophy. Matrix started as an experiment, just as the removal of grid doors, the increase of social privileges among the residents, and the granting of greater autonomy to residents in governing themselves. But Matrix has grown beyond the experimental stage, and it has provided a model for other treatment units at Lexington. From this perspective, Matrix may be an effective modality for certain persons in meeting the problem of drug addiction.

A moment of serious thought during the "game"



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